

Heart Songs by wings_g_leviosa

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Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Alternate Universe - Gender Changes, F/F, F/M, Prom, Rule 34, every chapter name is a weezer song, genderbent, its all pretty gay, lots of weezer, mason sucks, no pennywise cause he sucks, previously titled Losers of The Year

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Summary:

In which Ellie is really confused, Ruth throws a party, Bea reads some stuff, Billie does some cool skateboard tricks, Steph is secretly cool, Beau is an amazing human, and Mack just wants to have a good time.

Also prom, sort of.

1. Chapter One- Ellie

Author's Note:

Hey guys, I'm back. I really hope you like this, because I've been working on this for a while now. If you have any questions about the AU or just in general, you can find me on tumblr at either cacti-cool (main account) or londone-fog (writing account). Have fun!

Edit: I changed a few things. First off, the rating is now mature as there is a masturbation scene and some non-explicit sexual content in later chapters. Second, I changed the name of the fic, as well as the chapter names. Every chapter is named after a different Weezer song, as well as the fic name. I recommend you listen to the title song as you read the chapters! Thank you for understanding!

Ellie Kaspbrak was what you might refer to as “aggressively ordinary.”

She was an ordinary girl, from a little ordinary town, in the ordinary state of Maine. She lived in a small house with her dad. He had a boyfriend of sorts.

She thought of that one Monday morning, staring at her reflection in her vanity mirror. Her brown hair framed her tired face, eyes gaunt from lack of sleep. She fiddled with her hands, picking at the dry skin around her knuckles before looking around her room. Her light grey walls were decorated with a few sparse photos. Her furniture was wood, with a white floral bedspread pulled loosely over the twin mattress in the corner.

Ellie's eyes stopped to look at the clock on the bedside table with a sort of anxious anticipation. It was 7:33. Her boyfriend would be picking her up at 7:45, like he did everyday.

Ellie's boyfriend was a strange staple in her life. His name was Mason. He was a football player from the high school team, and therefore very large. If not for the constant workouts he underwent with the rest of the team in anticipation for the next season, he might have been obese. Ellie liked him well enough. He wasn't particularly interesting; if Ellie herself was ordinary, then Mason was downright bland.

Suddenly, Ellie's phone buzzed in her pocket. She held her breath, but was pleasantly surprised to see it was Ruth texting her.

Garbage Human: *prey tell, my swellest el, is my contact name still garbage human in your phone*

Ellie: Depends on why you're asking.

Garbage Human: *well i might not be so garbage anymore ;)*

The text was then followed by a picture of Ruth standing next to a car. Well, car might have been too glamorous a word. It was a bright orange monstrosity on wheels, the paint sunbleached and peeling in places. One of the wheels was missing a hubcap. There was a long crack running across the length of the windshield. And finally, squatting near the front tire, was Ruth. Her curly, bobbed hair was pulled away from her face, large wire-framed glasses sitting on the end of her upturned nose. Her mouth was pulled into a mock-serious

line; dangling from her fingers were the keys.

Ellie: Please tell me that isn't a car.

Garbage Human: *el you wound me*

Garbage Human: *yes that is my car her name is bessie*

Ellie couldn't help but nearly roll her eyes to the back of her head. Ruth was an interesting person. She was loud, with wild dark hair and even wilder eyes. Her mouth never seemed to close, even when she wasn't talking (which was rare). She only seemed to wear clothes that had a pattern in some way, with cigarette smell clinging to every fibre. Her knees, elbows and palms were always riddled in scrapes and bruises from countless tumbles with her longboard. Yes, Ruth was very interesting.

It was anyone's guess as to why they were each other's best friends.

Garbage Human: *i could start giving you rides now if you want*

Ellie could practically hear the secret pleading in Ruth's voice. The truth was, Ellie hadn't seen her friends nearly as much as she used to. Since Mason and her started dating a few months back, it seemed like more and more of her time went to humoring her boyfriend; going to games and practices and movie dates. She missed their group of seven and the time they used to spend together. Especially when it came to Ruth. That was why she barely hesitated to type out her

response.

Ellie: I guess. Just promise me I won't end up dying in that thing

Garbage Human: *you have my complete honor as a cub scout*

Ellie smiled to herself; a small secret thing she'd never admit to. A sudden, loud honk from outside surprised her out of her moment, her spine straightening harshly. She looked out the window to see Mason sitting in his car, the same as every morning. Ellie sighed, gathering up her supplies and racing down the stairs.

Her father sat in his chair, the television nattering on in the background. He saw her, and motioned for her to come over.

Ellie and her father had a somewhat odd relationship. This was largely in part to Ellie's mother dying when she was young, making her father somewhat... overprotective. Their relationship had become somewhat strained the older and more independent Ellie got. He didn't like her being around boys, but he especially didn't like her being around Ruth. He still to that day had no idea that she even spoke to Beau Marsh.

"Do you have your inhaler?"

"Yes, dad."

Ellie didn't actually need an inhaler. She'd known for a long time, since she was thirteen years old. Her father didn't know that she knew, because Ellie had never brought it up to him. It didn't just stop at the inhaler. He'd been trying to get her to take other bullshit medicine since she was small. Now that she knew better, she'd developed a complicated series of lies and sleight of hand to avoid taking the pills.

"You took your pills too, right?"

"Yup." She'd taken them, alright. They sat heavy in the front pocket of her overalls, like a collection of riverstones. She could safely say that her father knew next to nothing about who she really was; his "little girl" was a facade created to keep her sane.

"Alright, sweetheart. Have a good day at school." He leaned his cheek out, and she pressed a quick peck to the stubbled skin there.

Ellie didn't breathe until she slammed the door of Mason's car behind her.

"Jesus, you'll break a window doing that, Ellie. What's got your goat this morning?" Mason said, voice riding the line between scolding and whining.

"It's just my dad. He's been pestering me."

Mason sighed, a patronizing little thing.

“You’re cute when you’re annoyed. He’s just trying to protect you.” He leaned over and placed a kiss to her cheek. Ellie resisted the urge to lean away.

They’d had the fight before; Mason believed that Ellie needed to be protected. She was small, she was skinny, she was *feminine*. Ellie knew that none of that was true.

“Mason, I need to ask something,” Ellie said quietly, car rumbling to life and pulling away from the house.

“Hmm.”

“I, uh...” She traced the outline of her phone through her pocket. “... well, my friend just got a car. And she lives closer to my house than you do-”

“Just spit it out, already.”

“Ruth is going to start giving me rides to school. It’s just... it’s more convenient, and I don’t get to see her as much as I used to.”

The car became deathly silent.

“So I’m taking up too much of your time? Is that it?”

Ellie's fist clenched where it lay on her leg.

"I never said that. I just said that it's more convenient for Ruth to pick me up in the mornings."

"Why do you even want to spend so much time with her, anyway?"

Ellie looked away from the dashboard to her whitening knuckles, where a simple band of gold lay wrapped around her little finger. It was a ring that Ruth had given her on her sixteenth birthday, to replace the plastic cereal box ring that Ellie used to wear in childhood. It was the only jewelry that she wore everyday.

"Because she's my best friend, Mason, and she lives closer to me than you do. Nothing more."

The outline of the high school was rapidly approaching, and Ellie felt a little tension leak out of her body. Mason rubbed a thick hand over his face, letting out a long tired sigh.

"You know what, fine. Fine. On one condition."

Ellie unclenched her hand slowly, quietly syphoning the air out of her body.

“What’s that?”

Mason quickly jerked the car into the parking lot, the sound of old soda cans clattering around the back seat as they pulled to a somewhat jarring stop. He pulled up the parking brake and rounded on Ellie with all the surprise of a tiger leaping from the bushes. He placed a meaty hand on her shoulder as if to keep her there, pinned, with no option but to listen to him.

“Go to prom with me.”

“What?”

“I don’t care who the hell gets you to school, as long as you say you’ll go with me.”

Ellie stared into Mason’s eyes, a nearly clear blue. Basically colorless, like looking through window and seeing absolutely nothing on the other side. Devoid of any personality or interest. She could feel her throat closing and her eyes sting, and she wondered briefly if she was going into anaphylaxis.

She wanted so badly to say no. She wanted to run out of this car and never come back. Maybe she’d just suffocate from anxiety right then.

“Sure, sounds great Mason.”

What the fuck am I saying? What is wrong with me? she thought as Mason leaned in and kissed her; it was sloppy and hit the corner of her mouth more than her actual lips. She quickly pulled away, muttering some sort of farewell as her feet hit the asphalt.

The parking lot was filled to the brim with students and shitty cars. Ellie kept her eyes to the ground, white knuckling the straps of her backpack as strangers hollered all around her. She only looked up when she heard the characteristic bark of her best friend's laugh.

The loser's club, as it had been known for years, consisted of the most ragtag group of teens that Derry, Maine had to offer. They all stood around Ruth's new car, which was even more horrible in person. Billie Denbrough, their unofficial leader, was making a valiant effort to let loose with a would-be impressive string of cuss word from her place on the ground. Closer inspection showed a new hole torn in the knee of her jeans, with blood weakly dripping from the wound. Her trusty skateboard lay upended a few feet away. Ruth, as opposed to helping their friend, was laughing so hard she was nearly bent in half, black hair falling over her face. The other losers stood around in a sort of shell shocked state, not sure whether to help Billie or laugh along with Ruth.

They all seemed to make up their minds the closer that Ellie got.

Bea rushed to check Billie's knee, Mackenzie following with chuckle. Beau held out a hand, which Billie used to hoist herself to her feet. Steph stayed firmly in place, arms crossed with a stern look and secret smile in her eye. Ruth was practically on the ground herself at that point, Ellie's shadow reaching across her as she approached.

"Ruth, you fucking idiot, what did you do this time?" Ellie asked,

already rummaging through her bag for a band aid.

“Our darling Billie Jean can’t even do a kickflip without busting her ass,” Ruth said once she caught her breath.

“I c-c-can t-t-too, you a-a-a-fuck. I d-did this m-morning.”

Ellie shook her head, leaning down to press a bandage over the wound. If she’d been home, she would have dowsed it in hydrogen peroxide and used real gauze and bandage, but this would have to do. It was probably best, considering how dry and cracked her hands were these days.

“Thanks E-ellie,” Billie finally said.

And, at that, the bell for first period rang out, abruptly ending all shenanigans. Ellie slung her bag back over her shoulder, trying to ignore the itch under her skin from being so close to another person’s blood. Luckily, the thought was knocked out of her head by the slap of a hand against her shoulder.

“So, you seem tense. Did you have to flush yourself down the toilet to even get out of the house this morning?”

“Shut the hell up Ruth, I’m not in the mood for jokes.”

She didn’t have to look to know that Ruth’s permanent smile had

faltered. Her hand went from a heavy weight to a soft comfort in a matter of seconds. In a rare moment of genuity, Ruth dropped her voice so only Ellie could hear.

“You okay, El? Is it your dad or...?”

“No, no, not really. Just kinda stressed out. And for the last time, stop calling me that. That’s a kid nickname.”

“Yeah, not happening. I know you secretly love it. You’ll thank me someday.”

She paused a moment to chew on her bottom lips, allowing a scarce ray of anxiety to shine through.

“You know what’ll make you feel better? I’m driving the losers to the quarry today, break in Bessie and all that. I know you’re probably busy with your boy toy, but you’re more than welcome to come.”

Ellie’s stomach dropped. She wanted so badly to see her friends, but she felt obligated to see Mason after everything that happened that morning. But one look at her friend’s face, and she knew where she should really be.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Ruth’s eyes lit up, and her mouth cracked open in a wide grin.

“Oh, Ellie-Belly, you won’t regret it. I knew you wouldn’t miss the chance to see my blinding white thighs.”

Ellie rolled her eyes, but allowed Ruth to throw an arm around her shoulders as they walked to class.

Ellie had never been a fan of spit.

She distinctly remembered the first time she’d had a panic attack. She had been about seven years old, and some boy in her class had decided it was the perfect time to let loose with a spit glob worthy of the gods. Unfortunately, Ellie had been standing near enough to be in the splash zone. It somehow was so much different than playing loogie at the quarry with Billie and Ruth. This time, there was a wet splatter across the skirt of her jumper, and she lost it. Some combination her fathers instilled fear of germs and her own anxious tendencies brought about a cascade of tears and snot. It took a trip the restroom with both Ruth and Billie to get her to calm down enough to go back to recess.

Ellie thought of this as she sat in Mason’s car after school, his tongue making a valiant attempt to fight her tonsils.

This was an activity that took up much of her time after school. She’d never admit it to herself, but it was probably one of her least favorite parts of the day. Ellie genuinely struggled with physical contact; she’d gotten used to the losers touching her, but anyone else made her uncomfortable. Kissing Mason fell under the umbrella of uncomfortable.

Mason, on the other hand, was having a great time. Ellie was pushed further and further into the seat as he grew more and more eager. His hand was wrapped loosely around her thigh.

Ellie's eyes opened, trying to look at the time on the clock and pretend she was interested in kissing. It was 3:24. School had ended nearly thirty minutes ago. The losers had all surely left to go to the quarry by then.

Suddenly, as if her mind had been read, she felt her phone buzz in her pocket. She slowly, carefully, reached her hand into her pocket to pull the phone out and held it behind Mason. The message was from Steph, saying that she needed to get to the quarry ASAP. Apparently Ruth wouldn't stop complaining that Ellie had abandoned them.

Ellie's mind was quickly snatched from the message when she the hand on her thigh move to cup her breast. She pulled away quickly, smacking Mason's hand away.

"What? I thought you liked that." he whined.

She didn't like it. There was never a time where she said she did. Ellie tried to quickly think of an excuse.

"I, uh..."

“Come on, don’t be nervous.” Mason reached over and fiddled with one of the buckles on her overalls, trying to subtly unhook the button from the catch. An idea suddenly appeared in Ellie’s mind, and she pushed his hand away again.

“Uh, I’m wearing overalls.”

Indeed she was. They were her favorite pair, with the floral appliques on the legs that Steph had ironed on for her.

“What does that have to do with anything.”

“Well, uh, that would violate my rule.”

Ellie had the forethought when her and Mason started dating to put a rule in place: He was not allowed to touch her underneath her clothes, specifically when it came to pants.

“How’s that?”

“Overalls are like a shirt/pants combo. That breaks the rule.”

She could tell that it was a half-baked excuse, and Mason knew it too. His eyebrow was raised in confusion, but he relented and moved away. Ellie breathed a sigh of relief.

“You’ve been acting strange today.”

“No I haven’t”

Silence. Mason sighed, scrubbed at his face with his hand.

“Look, I have to do some conditioning today. You can either walk home or stay and watch. It’s up to you.”

Ellie resisted the urge to pump her fist in victory.

“I’d like to stay, but I have a lot of homework. Maybe tomorrow?”

Mason nodded, but Ellie was already out of the car.

She didn’t start running until she was sure he couldn’t see her anymore.

A genuine smile burst across her face as she pumped her legs. The air was beginning to warm, spring chill giving way to summer heat. The end of junior year was rapidly approaching, and the feeling of true freedom spurred Ellie on as she raced toward the quarry.

2. El Scorcho

Notes for the Chapter:

Haha, you aren't getting rid of me that easily. I've had to replot a bunch of stuff, but I'll hopefully be updating more regularly. But I promise, this fic is not forgotten. Please stick with it, and leaving positive feedback only helps!

Ruth wasn't in a fantastic mood.

By all logic, she should have been. It was a Friday evening. The sun was just starting to dip below the horizon, and the frigid Maine winter was finally starting to thaw for good. It was warm enough for Ruth and Billie to pull out their boards and lazy roll around Ruth's street.

Yes, Ruth should have been happy. And she would have been if Ellie hadn't cancelled plans for what felt like the hundredth time that month.

Ellie was one of Ruth's most favorite people, if that was even the term. They'd been each other's ride-or-die for nearly twelve years. Ruth knew about how crazy Ellie's father really was, and Ellie knew... well, anything there was to know about Ruth.

Billie was starting to become obviously agitated with Ruth's glum mood.

"W-what's wrong? You've been a-acting weird all day."

Ruth was sitting on the sidewalk, feet resting on her longboard, moving slowly back and forth. She was working a hangnail between her teeth, hissing when it finally gave way with a sting and the characteristic tang of blood.

“I’m not acting weird.”

“Bullshit. This is about Ellie, isn’t it?”

Ruth’s throat clenched; Billie never stuttered when she was truly serious about something. Her long, auburn hair was nearly a halo in the soft gold light, her brown eyes burning with suspicion.

“Okay, fine, maybe it is about Ellie. It’s none of your business anyway.”

Billie raised a single eyebrow. Damn, she was great at convincing.

“I’m just sort of upset that I keep getting blown off. I can barely remember the last time we hung out.”

Billie nodded, crossing her arms and chewing the inside of her cheek. She paced a minute, stopped, looked at Ruth, then sat next to her on the sidewalk. She spoke carefully, quietly.

“You know she’s straight, right?”

Ruth scoffed, willing the sting in her eyes to go away.

“Yeah, I know that. Doesn’t make this any easier.”

Billie just gave her a sympathetic look, and wrapped a gentle arm around her shoulders. Ruth didn’t hesitate before smashing her face into her friend’s shoulder, letting out a dramatic sigh. Billie laughed and patted her on the back.

“You’ll make it t-through. Take it f-from me, okay?”

“Thanks Billie Jean. You’ll make an honest woman of me yet,” Ruth said with a laugh and a wipe under the eye.

They both skated until well after the sun was gone, but Ruth didn’t stop thinking, not even as she curled up in bed alone that night.

The lights had all been turned off, the only remaining luminance coming from the moon. It’s blue glow clung to the edges of her window and furniture. Ruth loved the moon. Even though she was almost always alone this time of night, she never truly felt it as long as she was facing her window.

But that night, she simply set her glasses on her nightstand and looked at the ceiling.

She wanted nothing more than to see Ellie, as desperate as that sounded. She missed her best friend. It was like going out in public without your bra on; no one really knew how weird you felt, but you definitely felt it. She felt like she was hiding a missing limb; she sometimes even felt like she was hiding her hurt from herself. Of course Ellie had the right to date whoever she wanted, but Ruth had the selfish wish that she wouldn't.

Ellie dating who ever she wanted meant *Mason*. And *Mason* was the closest thing to the devil Ruth had ever met. The few times she and Ellie had hung out and he was there, it was possibly the worst thing that had ever happened to her.

Well, that was a lie.

The day Ellie broke her arm was the worst of Ruth's life by far, and the same could probably go for Ellie as well.

Billie had gotten the hair-brained idea to go rooting around in the old, nasty well house on Neibolt Street. Ruth still swore it was haunted. She had that day as well, but Billie was convincing and that made Ellie headstrong, so everyone went. They'd nearly lost Steph in the bowels of that house, and Ruth wasn't entirely convinced she'd ever forgiven them. But the worst was Ellie. She'd gotten separated from them, and fallen right through the second story floor to the kitchen table below. By the time the rest of the group found her, she was moaning on the floor with her arm right snapped in two. She only screamed when Ruth set the bone back in place.

That wasn't the worst part. Not even close.

The worst part came later, with Ellie sitting in the front seat of her father's car, and the other six losers standing in her front yard. Simon Kaspbrak could be really mean when he wanted to be.

He'd dropped his keys on the ground, and Ruth bent to pick them up. But with one meaty hand, he snatched them away from her, an ugly sneer sitting below his horrible mustache.

"Stay back," he'd snarled. "I don't need a dyke bitch influencing my daughter. So don't bother coming around here anymore."

That was the only time Ruth saw Ellie sob in public. And it was the only time that Ruth couldn't comfort her.

Of course, it also brought about the first time Ellie really stood up to her dad. It didn't go well, but the losers were still together so it could have been worse.

Well, sort of together. Ellie and Mason were an untouchable fortress of solitude, and that fortress didn't include the losers.

Ruth turned on her side, looking at the fuzzy outline of the window.

She didn't get much sleep that night.

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It was uncharacteristically warm for late April. The water in the quarry wasn't quite warm enough for true comfort, but it was just enough for them to jump in without complaint.

Billie and Mackenzie were already stripped down to their underwear, clothes in a haphazard pile together. They were laughing about about something, but it was all white noise to Ruth. She kept nervously glancing over her shoulder.

"What's with the wait, Trashmouth?" Beau asked, shucking his jeans and throwing them into the rapidly growing clothes pile. Ruth rolled her eyes, pulling her shirt over her head.

"Saving myself. You wouldn't be able to keep your hands off me without my shell."

"Yeah, cause visible ribs really get me going."

She grinned, slapping a hand across her stomach and wiggling her eyebrows. Beau rolled his eyes and walked to Bea, the pair making their way toward the cliff. Ruth noticed Bea's rosy blush, and rolled her eyes, adjusting the elastic band of her sports bra from where it curled oddly around her ribs.

As many had pointed out to her, she had no tits.

“No word from Ellie, I’m guessing?” Steph said suddenly, walking towards the clothes pile and beginning to neatly fold Beau’s shirt. Ruth internally groaned.

“You don’t need to guess to know the answer to that.”

“I know. I was just trying to be polite.”

Silence fell over them in a semi comfortable way, only broken by the splash of their friends leaping into the water below. Ruth sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Is it me? Did I do something?”

“Of course not. Don’t be stupid. It obviously has everything to do with her dad.”

Ruth knew that in her heart of hearts, but it was hard to believe most days.

“What do I do Steph?”

Steph placed the last article of folded clothing on the rock she was sitting on, beginning to remove her own.

“Just be there for her. She’s smart, and this won’t last forever. When everything falls apart, she’ll need someone to put her back together.”

Ruth blinked, taken aback by the sheer wisdom of the statement. Steph’s face sat neutral, staring at their friends on the water. Ruth thought she might have seen a hint of something in the way she lingered on Billie, but she wasn’t sure.

Just as she was about to ask, the slap of tennis shoes against the rocks broke the pair out of their trance.

Sure enough, with her notoriously spotless Keds and overalls, was Ellie. Running. She was oddly good at running for someone who wasn’t allowed to till only a few years ago.

Her face had a sheen to it, and her hair was snarled with small, visible tangles. Her hair never seemed quite smooth even when she hadn’t been running. As she approached the pair, she said only three words.

“Sorry I’m late.”

Sorry I’m late? thought Ruth. *I oughta slap her.*

“Well, well, if it isn’t Swell El. Finally decided to grace us mere plebs with your presence, I see.”

Ellie just sighed, placing her hands on her knees and making a valiant effort to breathe deeply.

“I’m not a fan of the nicknames, Ruthie. You should know.”

“Yet here you are, pulling the Ruthie card.”

Steph looked between them, an utter loathsome look shadowing her face.

“I’m jumping in now,” she said matter of factly, placing her folded skirt with the rest of her clothes and taking a flying leap to the water below.

Ruth stared at Ellie awkwardly, the sound of Steph hitting the water echoing behind her. She grinned just as awkwardly, running a nervous hand through the baby hairs at the nape of her neck.

“So, uh, look what the cat dragged in?” She mentally slapped herself; she couldn’t sound weirder if she tried.

“Yeah yeah. I told Mason I had homework so I could leave early. Your welcome by the way.”

In that moment (though she’d never admit it), Ruth felt a warmth

spread through her chest. She knew Ellie well enough to tell when she was making a valiant effort to make up for missing so many plans. It was an awkward sort of *I'm sorry* that only Ellie could deliver. Ruth supposed she'd just have to take it where she could.

“Aw, El! I knew you cared.” Ruth rushed over to scoop up her friend, jumping around obnoxiously. It was her way of saying *I forgive you, and I always will* . Or something like that.

“Oh, can it Trashmouth. My field of fucks is barren,” Ellie squealed, making no real effort to conceal the smile on her face. Ruth set her down gently, and they shared an easy smile with each other.

Ruth tried her hardest to digest the butterflies banging around in her stomach.

3. QB Blitz

Summary for the Chapter:

That particular Tuesday, however, Ellie's mind was far from the books in front of her. The memory of yesterday morning's ultimatum rang like a bell in her head: come to prom with me, come to prom with me, come to prom...

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey yall. I know I haven't updated this fic in nearly two years, but I felt a surge of inspiration so here we are. I can't guarantee that I'll have a regular updating schedule but I'm going to continue working on this bit by bit for a while. I really hope you like this :)

Although the Losers Club was a group of severely different people, they all bonded over a laundry list of supposedly mundane things.

They all loved watching movies at the Aladdin on some Fridays.

They all hated Helen Bowers and her gang.

They all ate too many Cosmic Brownies and drank too much coffee (and beer, depending on the day).

They would all rather cut off a limb than flunk out of physics, because flunking out of physics meant taking it in summer school. Taking it in summer school meant another three months with Ms. Green.

Ms. Green was, to put it plainly, an idiot. She was a shit teacher, who probably knew less about physics than her students. The risk of failing the end of course exam was unfavorably high.

That was why, like clockwork, Bea, Mackenzie, and Ellie sat in the library after school to study at least once a week.

That particular Tuesday, however, Ellie's mind was far from the books in front of her. The memory of yesterday morning's ultimatum rang like a bell in her head: *come to prom with me, come to prom with me, come to prom...*

"Ellie? Hello, earth to El?" Mackenzie said, waving a hand in front of her face, snapping Ellie out of her trance. Bea and Mackenzie sat blinking at her.

"Sorry, I just can't think straight. I think my brain is fried." Ellie looked at her hands, absentmindedly picking at her dry knuckles. Mackenzie slapped her hands apart.

"Stop picking at your knuckles and tell me what's wrong. You've been off lately."

"Yeah, we're all worried about you," Bea added. Ellie sighed, fiddling with a strand of hair.

“So, now that Ruth has a ‘car’, she’s started giving me rides to school. Mason was kinda upset about it, but he told me he’d let it go if I agreed to go to prom with him.”

Mackenzie and Bea looked at each other, an odd look passing between them. They both turned to her, strained sort of smiles on their faces.

“Um, not that prom is bad in and of itself, but Mason making you go just so you can see your friend more often is kinda... yikes,” Mackenzie said, looking right into Ellie’s eyes. Ellie shuttered and looked away, fiddling with the seam of her jeans.

“It’s fine. He’s just... particular, y’know? He likes things a certain type of way.”

“Like your dad, right?” mumbled Bea. Mackenzie hit her on the arm. “What Mack, you know I’m right.”

Ellie grit her teeth and clenched her fingers. The only thing worse than someone saying those things was that she knew they were right.

“I can’t focus. I think I’m gonna just go home,” she says tersely, sweeping her books haphazardly into her bag.

“Ellie, wait.” Mackenzie grabs her wrist gently. “Look, we’re just worried about you. You haven’t exactly been around much these past few months. Have you found a prom dress?”

“Of course not. He only asked me yesterday.”

“Well, I know none of us are really focusing. Let’s go look around for a prom dress.”

Ellie looked into Mackenzie and Bea's pleading eyes and stiffened.

"Absolutely not."

Not even fifteen minutes later, she stood in a dressing room of one of the only formal wear shops in town. She could hear her friends chattering outside, and she sighed in exasperation.

"I don't think this dress is very... me, Mack."

That was an understatement. Mackenzie had handed her this little black number, and Ellie might as well have been wearing a sausage skin. It had looked like something that would look nice on a model, but Ellie had been stricken with the body of a twelve year old boy. At least Ruth made her lankiness work; Ellie was stuck in the land of hiding behind sweaters and overalls.

"Let us see you!" Bea squealed through the curtain. Ellie sighed and walked out.

Her friends looked at her, slack jawed, for a moment, then slowly began laughing.

"Stop laughing. You wanted me to come here."

"Oh honey, you look so uncomfortable," Mackenzie howled, slapping her own knee. Ellie rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it; I look like a dude. I'm so done. I'm going home."

"Ellie, what's going on? You've been off all day. You normally tease right back," Bea asked, voice growing soft. She stood and placed a

gentle hand on Ellie's shoulder, eyes searching for the problem. Ellie crossed her arms and leaned against the wall.

"I really don't want to go to prom," she said quietly.

"Then why are you going?"

"Because I promised I would, and Mason will pitch a fit if I don't." Bea gave her a sad sort of smile.

"You know, you don't always have to do what he says."

Ellie chuckled a little.

"I know, and I don't always. But it really is just easier sometimes."

Then, as though she'd been shot in the back, Mackenzie sat up and raced over to a rack toward the back of the store. She came back dragging a large white thing, gently shoving it into Ellie's hands and pushing her toward the dressing room.

"Put this on! I have a good feeling."

So she peeled off the black thing and carefully stepped into the new dress. The skirt was semi-full, ending about mid calf. It was simple,

the top a plain white satin and the skirt a soft tulle. Ellie pulled her hair over one shoulder, staring at herself.

It's perfect, she thought dimly.

And for not quite the first time, she wished she were going with her friends. Ruth alone at the very least. She could picture them all dancing around together and singing, bumbling around in formal wear just because they could. She knew Ruth would insist on them dancing. She could picture herself laughing in this dress, smiling. Ruth would pull her close and...

... and...

... and nothing. Nothing. Because she was going with Mason, because he asked and they were dating and that was the sort of thing you did when you were dating someone.

So she took a deep breath, and stepped out into the shop to face the reality in front of her.

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Ellie loved showering. She loved it enough for it to be a little odd. But she couldn't help but be a little obsessed with the feeling of being warm and clean and a little raw. She felt safest with the feeling of steam clogging her throat.

After the events of that afternoon, she needed to feel clean again. The severe scrutiny of her friends and the surfacing of unwanted thoughts were really kicking her ass. She wasn't even about to unpack the

deeply ingrained crawl under her skin from being in a public dressing room for an hour.

She simply placed a firm block in her mind and slathered her hair in shampoo. The water was warm against her tired back and shoulders; a welcome comfort. She heard her phone buzz against the countertop, but she paid it no mind. She was too busy not-thinking about prom to focus on anything other than cleaning. She didn't want to think about Mason, or her wish for a better prom, or Ruth. Especially Ruth. Ruth who would certainly laugh if she knew about Ellie's constant inner conflict. She was always the type to be carefree, a genuine nomad in life. Ruth wouldn't have continued to let Mason push her around. She wouldn't have agreed to date Mason at all.

Ellie groaned as loud as she dared; all of this not-thinking about Ruth and prom only made her think of Ruth and prom harder. She finally just gave up the ghost and turned off the water, toweling off and slipping into a sleep shirt.

One thing she was not expecting, however, was what she saw when she walked into her room. Seeing Ruth outside her window had once been a normality, but none of the other losers had thought to try. That was why seeing Beau crouched outside the glass came as a shock. Ellie rushed over to unlock the window and yank the pane up as high as it would go.

"What the hell are you doing? Do you know what time it is?" she hissed through her teeth.

"Yes, of course I know. But I need help and I couldn't think of anyone else to go to."

Ellie crossed her arms and furrowed her brow in confusion and suspicion, but moved aside to allow her friend in. Beau, frankly, looked a mess; his fiery hair was especially mussed, his flannel sleeves two different lengths and a wild look in his eye.

“I need help figuring out how to ask Bea to prom,” he said, tone utterly serious. That was all it took for Ellie to crack, laughter spilling out of her in slow peals.

“Why in the hell do you think I’m any good at that stuff? I don’t have a creative bone in my body.”

“Yes, but you’re organized, and realistic. Also Steph can be mean.” Ellie couldn’t argue with that.

“Well, what were you thinking of doing? I think she might already suspect that you’ll ask her.”

“She likes books. Is there something we could do that has to do with books?”

Ellie placed a curled fist under her chin in thought.

“I think I might have an idea.”

So they sat and developed a plan. Beau would have Bea help him find a few books, and each book would have a sticky note on the cover with a letter. Once she arranged the letters (spelling ‘PROM’, of course), he would hand her the final sticky note with a question mark on it. Beau nearly hollered once everything came together, and Ellie had to shush him.

“Thank you so much! You have no idea how much this helped,” he

said, sweeping Ellie into a strangling hug. She squeezed back in earnest.

“It’s really nothing.”

Beau suddenly got an odd look in his eye.

“What about you? Aren’t you going to prom?”

Ellie swallowed, fiddling with the edge of her t-shirt.

“Yeah, I am. Mason asked me yesterday, actually.”

Beau looked at her face, an expression of slight confusion and worry scribbled across his features.

“Have you talked to Ruth?” Ellie couldn’t help but scoff.

“Of course I haven’t talked to Ruth. Why are you under the illusion that she takes anything seriously?”

“Well, she’s worried about you. It wouldn’t hurt to at least try. She may surprise you.”

And just like that, quick as he came, Beau was gone.

His words echoed around in Ellie's head long after he left, as she lay still under her covers. The phrase *she's worried about you* spun around her brain like a broken record. For a moment, she tried to imagine those words actually leaving Ruth's mouth. She had her moments of genuine, unbridled compassion, but Ellie severely doubted that she'd ever heard Ruth say she was worried about anything. Not out loud, anyway.

But maybe she didn't have to. Ellie thought back to the other day, when Ruth pulled her aside and asked if she was okay. How she always texts to check in and invites Ellie out no matter what. How her eyes tended to have a sliver of something in them that showed she was thinking of Ellie's best interest.

Oh fuck, Ruth was worried about her.

The thought that Ruth was worried about anything brought a bad taste to her mouth.

Ellie turned to her side and stared at the wall. The photos she had tacked to the wall stared back. Her friends were the main focus of nearly all of them. Billie trying to teach Steph how to skate, Bea and Mackenzie reading with comically serious faces, all of them just messing around. The one that drew Ellie's gaze, however, was a photobooth strip of her and Ruth together from the mall in Portland. The images progressed like this: Ruth and Ellie smiling, Ruth leaning over, Ruth leaving a big fat raspberry on Ellie's cheek, Ellie's eyes going wide in shock, and then a blur. Ellie couldn't help but smile to herself at the memory. She couldn't help but remember the quickening in her heart when she felt Ruth's chapped lips brushing against her cheek, even though it was an action meant to annoy her.

She hadn't even minded the germs all that much.

She rolled back onto her back and groaned into her hands. Ellie hated nighttime; everything managed to be so calm and still that her brain got to working too freely. And when her mind got to thinking freely, it thought of Ruth, and then Ellie got in trouble. Her brain started thinking that it was totally reasonable to be thinking of Ruth in a particular way, and then she couldn't stop thinking about what it would have felt like if Ruth, instead of blowing hot breath onto Ellie's cheek in the photo booth, had instead softly pushed their lips together.

And once she started thinking about that, then she was in big, big trouble.

Because she can't think about Ruth's lips on hers without thinking about Ruth's hands in her hair, or how she'd reach up and place a hand on her jaw. She couldn't stop imagining the feeling of the hem of Ruth's sweater between the fingers of her other hand, how Ruth's warmth would be radiating off of her skin. For as skinny as she was, she had always been warm-blooded.

Ellie shook herself and sat straight up in bed, scrubbing her palms against her face. What the fuck was wrong with her? She had a boyfriend, and Ruth was her long time best friend. Why was she acting this way? She slowly dragged her hands down her face and settled them against her thighs. She realized dully that the creeping itch of urgency and want was beginning to work its way under her skin. It made her warm and fidgety.

Ellie flopped back down on the bed.

She'd never hated herself more in her life than she did in that moment, with want on her mind and the illusion feverish kisses peppering her skin. Ellie briefly wondered if it would just be easier if she were to lay down in the road and wait for a car to crush her.

No, she's just being fucking dramatic.

She told herself that like a mantra, *I'm just being fucking dramatic*, as she yanked her covers up to her chin and willed herself to an uneasy sleep.